

LIGHTNING OVER WATER

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Lightning Over Water was shot in April and May 1979, in the last few weeks before Nicholas Ray died of cancer. Wim Wenders has given Ray co-director credit and at one time had as a subtitle 'Nick's Film'; he has also put himself squarely into the film, so that it is finally less a portrait than the account of a relationship, and a cinematic one at that, which could be termed very much of our times. In the first shot, New York at dawn, Wenders is seen arriving on the corner of Spring Street and West Broadway where Ray lives in a SoHo loft. In hushed tones, uneasily redolent of somebody's parody of what he thought a Nick Ray film was like, he describes how the night flight from Los Angeles brought him in on a cool and clear day, how 'I was here to see Nick' whose films 'have their place in the history of cinema', and how he first climbed those darkened stairs two years ago to ask Ray to play in *The American Friend*. 'We made it together, we played a lot of backgammon too, and we became good friends.' Wenders, doyen of the New German Cinema, has taken two weeks out of pre-production on *Hammett*, which he is making for Francis Coppola, doyen of New Hollywood, to visit one of

the legendary casualties of old Hollywood, who sailed off into obscurity, in apparent fulfilment of one of his films' most famous lines, 'I'm a stranger here myself', eventually finding work on an endless student movie whose title, *We Can't Go Home Again*, completes a couplet that might be his epitaph.

The stage would thus seem set for a grisly *hommage*, actually on the brink of the grave. Young cinéphiles pawing over the corpse of the *cinéma de papa* should be a less than edifying spectacle. The film-makers—and Ray's—determination to commit something to film before the subject gives out is a little disturbing. That the subject wished it on himself is arguably no defence of the movie groupies who rushed in to take advantage of a mortally ill man. It might also be argued as no defence that Wenders concedes the project's distasteful aspects as he goes along: displaying his own artifice by cutting in rough video footage showing how scenes are set up and a 'performance' is nursed out of Ray; worrying that the pressures of making a film leave him no time to be concerned for Ray as a human being.

Wenders' voice-over even creates problems for itself in this respect. It is over-fastidious in calling attention to the stricken sensibilities behind the camera, the heroic fineness of their doubts and fears in the living presence of Death. And yet one of the most ironic and intriguing aspects of the situation goes virtually unmentioned. Ray was a 'personal' director who finally could not live with Hollywood and set out into the wilderness to find something truer to himself; Wenders is a director at a time when the 'personal' cinema is in, yet whose films acknowledge their emotional and spiritual debt to Hollywood Ray (such acknowledgments, in fact, are the *sine qua non* of the new auteurs). Wenders flying in from his ten million dollar *Hammett* to genuflect

before the broken and dying Ray might even smack of Bogdanovichism at its worst. The topic does crop up in one brief exchange, and Wenders commemorates Ray's reply in his film's title, a cryptically poetic image that raises the whole question of what the two auteurs mean to each other: 'For one per cent of that I could make (long pause) lightning over water.'

This much admitted, however, it must be said that there is something heroic about Wenders' project. Given his own central performance in it, and the occasionally painful obtrusiveness of his commentary, it could hardly be said that he has effaced himself before his subject. But his act of *hommage* is often on the point of becoming a curious act of osmosis. Admitting his own uncertainty about how to make a film with the dying Ray, Wenders seems almost to want to bequeath the film to him, to have it become his last work, an encapsulation perhaps of the unwieldy *We Can't Go Home Again*. A strange labyrinth opens up here. Wenders, in search of direction, wants Ray to lead him, to take over the film; he casts himself, in effect, as the bewildered young protagonist of a Ray movie who despairs of parental understanding and guidance. But Wenders is also a film-maker who has found the image for his alienation and oedipal odysseys (*Kings of the Road*, *Alice in the Cities*) in Ray's work, not to mention his previous act of wilful cross-cultural identification, adapting Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* into a Germanic *Johnny Guitar*. Whatever *Lightning Over Water* reveals about their personal relationship, in imaginative terms it seems to represent Wenders' own 'coming home'.

If the central issue of the film for Wenders is direction, for Ray it is control. It was for that reason, after all, that he abandoned Hollywood to begin his own odyssey, his attempt to identify with

the generation he had championed in *They Live By Night* and *Rebel Without a Cause*. Ironically enough, that generation, as represented by Wenders, has sought him out and honoured him for what he was in Hollywood. But the director Ray wanted to become is represented by *We Can't Go Home Again*, the film which began in Chicago in 1968, when Ray tried to set up a project dealing with the conspiracy trials, then continued with his teaching appointment in an upstate New York college, and like a snowball seemed to go on forever collecting the confusions and anxieties of a generation which Ray had made his own (much as it went on collecting film materials and techniques). Ray is seen here, still screening, editing and worrying over the film just before his death—apparently confirming the verdict of those who have said he was an individualist who needed the discipline of the studio.

Meanwhile at Vassar College, where Wenders films a lecture given by Ray, *The Lusty Men* is screened. After the elegiac sequence in which Robert Mitchum limps out of the paper-strewn rodeo ground to make his journey back to the derelict home where he finds comics and an old gun still in their hiding place, Wenders tells Ray, 'It's more about coming home than anything I've seen.' *Lightning Over Water* contains both images, both versions of Ray, and while Wenders is insistent, like a good auteurist, on the importance of where Ray has been, he is willing, as a final gift, to have him take this film in another direction, as formally inchoate as *We Can't Go Home Again*, perhaps, but as direct and painful in its need for self-reckoning.

At the beginning of his Vassar address, Ray announces, 'I am, and you are now, in the process of making a film.' This is presumably a reference to Wenders' undertaking. But it is hard to know what is being referred to when, after compar-

ing *The Lusty Men*—developed during its shooting from only twenty-six pages of script—to his current project, and describing research in Washington which revealed that what people wanted most of all was a home of their own, he declares, 'That is what this is all about.' When he then announces, 'The closer I get to my ending, the closer I am to rewriting any beginning,' he could be taking in *The Lusty Men*, *We Can't Go Home Again* and *Lightning Over Water*.

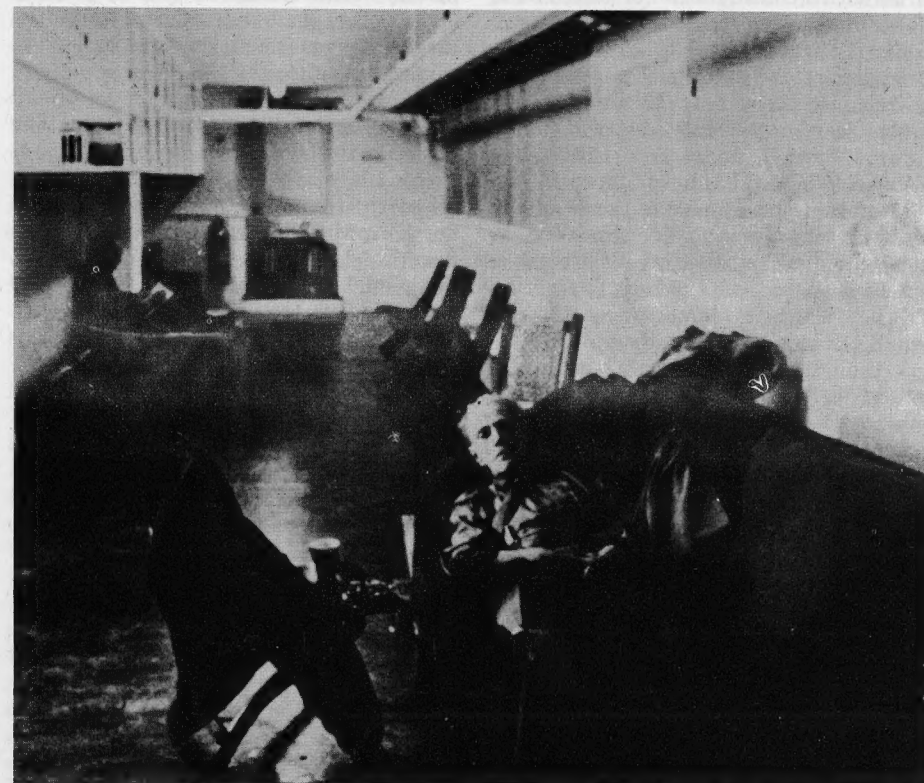
Not so much rewriting the beginning, perhaps, as finding a new one is what *Lightning Over Water* is about. There is a lot of discussion over what kind of story the film should tell, and it does seem to have been the intention at one stage that this should be an acted-out film with a script and all the trimmings. Fragments of this remain, in between the *ciné-vérité* and self-reflective footage: Wenders' dawn arrival in the loft, for instance, or the later 'drama' of Ray being suddenly whisked off to hospital. But the 'story' element never comes together, perhaps because of Ray's health, but just as likely because he was no longer disposed to working that way. Film had become a means of turning over pieces of his own life, of reconstructing identity; it was probably in the nature of this final stage of his creative life that *We Can't Go Home Again* should remain forever unfinished. The film—*Lightning Over Water* and within that the 'film' Ray and Wenders discuss making—is the story of 'A man who wants to bring himself all together before he dies.'

At one point, Ray reads to Wenders a story outline about a once famous painter who can't sell any of his current output and who, in order to regain his past and his self-esteem, steals his paintings from the galleries and replaces them with forgeries. Wenders tells him that he should drop the fictional pretence and make it about himself; to which Ray replies, 'Then it has to be about you, too.' Pressed further about how he would find himself in a film in which the action would be Ray's, Wenders declares, 'My action is going to be determined by yours, my action is going to be determined by your facing death.'

The scene again is uncomfortably self-conscious, the exchange of mutual politenesses about creative responsibility a little precious. But its tentativeness, even its evasiveness, is crystallised in the film's linking sequences of a Chinese junk drifting eerily into New York, then leaving again to celebrate a wake after Ray's death. Its justification is Ray's earlier declaration, when asked how he would like 'their' film to end, 'I'm going to hold out for a Chinese junk, sailing out festooned with red flags.' In the event, the junk is festooned with ribbons of film, flapping from a moviola on deck while a camera slowly rotates of its own accord. The image is Ray's—the junk is linked with the idea of sailing off to find a cure for cancer—and the action, with its abstracting aerial views, is Wenders'. The final effect, a romanticism which seems both insidious and adventurous, attests to the deepest level of their collaboration on a project which, in a sense, never happens. ■



Wim Wenders (right) preparing aerial sequence of *'Lightning Over Water'*.



Ray outside the Vassar auditorium.